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The importance of formulating a good theme topic is discussed, and a brief definition of a successful topic is provided. The major portion of the article consists of suggestions on how to use literature as a source for 11 different types of themes. These suggestions may be adapted to any age level. (BN)

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LITERATURE AS A SOURCE FOR THEMES

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It is my conviction—based on my experience with the teaching of English at the secondary and college levels since 1939—that composition not only can but must be taught. It is also my conviction that the successful teaching of composition depends most heavily upon two skills which the teacher must develop: 1. the formulation of good theme topics and 2. the evaluation of student writing in ways which are meaningful and helpful to the student. I address myself in this short discussion to one aspect of the first skill.

A good theme topic gives specific purpose and direction to the student writer. In other words, it sets up a specific "writing problem" to be worked out by the student. Too many teachers of composition—at all levels—make assignments on a par with the time-worn "My Summer Vacation" or "A Book That I Have Read." And then they wonder why the results are so dull and poorly written. In an English course which integrates literature, grammar, and composition (and any good English course does), literature can furnish a source for any sort of writing problem and further the understanding of the literature at the same time. The suggestions that follow were prepared for a group of teachers who would be teaching an Advanced Standing English Course to twelfth-grade students, but they can be adapted to any level by the use of different selections.

A cause-and-effect theme makes a good early assignment, because it helps the student to explore causes of misreading. It can be set up in this way. Choose a group of three short selections—short stories, poems, essays—and assign to the class for careful reading in advance, but with no stated purpose except careful reading. You have chosen selections which contain material that will arouse I. A. Richards' "doctrinal adhesions" to specific religions, attitudes toward sexual morality, political views, etc. Possibilities are Morley Callaghan's "Sick Call," T. S. Eliot's "The Hippopotamus," Ernest Hemingway's "Ten Indians," A. E. Housman's "Bredon Hill," a chapter from William Buckley's *Conservatism vs. Chaos* or Corliss Lamont's *On the Necessity of Atheism.* You then assign an impromptu theme: To which of these three selections did you react most strongly, either favorably or unfavorably, and why?

You point out that the organization will be either cause to effect or effect to cause (or you may designate which it is to be). The class evaluation of selected themes is the springboard for a discussion of the necessity for reading *what the author wrote*, not what the reader *thought* the author wrote—a most important point in the study of literature—as well as an opportunity to analyze the cause-and-effect structure, an extremely common and important variety of discourse in all areas.

A definition theme may be assigned from literature, though it would be well to have presented the concept of extended definition in advance, either deductively or inductively. Your students have been reading *Pride and Prejudice.* You assign the theme, either impromptu or out of class: Write an extended definition of what *Miss Austin* means by "pride" or

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by "prejudice." Refer both to the novel and to your own experience in working out your definition, but remember that you are defining the author's meaning, not your own.

The value of this kind of problem is self-evident for the study of literature as well as composition. In the suggestions that follow, I will assume that the literature-study aspects are obvious.

Narrative-descriptive writing may be assigned on the ancient principle of imitation. Your class is embarking on a novel, say, by Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray, or Trollope; the students have discussed the opening chapter in some detail. Make an out-of-class theme assignment: Using the same method—but probably not the same kind of language—present your home town, or some other environment which you know well, using at least some of the same narrative-descriptive devices.

Argument of a question of fact, though usually touched off by issues outside the realm of literature, may also be related to literature. Your students have read, and perhaps discussed, Galsworthy's story "Quality." Assign a theme, either impromptu or out of class: "The major point which Galsworthy makes in this story is. . ." Confine yourself to statements or implications *contained in the story itself.*

Argument of a question of value is a natural problem in literary study. The students have read almost any important short story, poem, play, or novel. Assign an out-of-class theme: Analyze and discuss a judgment which this author makes about life—its significance, its purpose, its pattern, or its values. (Limit yourself to *one* judgment.) Then evaluate this judgment. In your evaluation, be specific—apply the author's judgment to your own experience.

Argument of a question of policy can stem from any controversial, but well-written essay. *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly* are good sources, or the students have read Huxley's essay "Toward a Liberal Education." Assign an out-of-class theme: Secondary school education should (should not) be altered to conform with Huxley's ideas. (Limit your topic; back up your generalizations with specifics, particularly from your own experience.)

Persuasion in connection with literature need not be limited to the usual topic, "Why You Should Read This Book." Suppose your students have read Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, or Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*; Assign an out-of-class theme: Persuade an audience of parents to take a different path of action from one *specific* course illustrated in the work read.

Comparison and contrast, though an extremely common assignment, is a difficult mode for most students. It should probably come late in the development of expository techniques. Assign for close reading a pair or triplet of poems—William Cowper's "The Poplar Field" and G. M. Hopkins' "Binsey Poplars"; Louis MacNeice's "Sunday Morning" and Karl Shapiro's "The Dome of Sunday"; Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Ralegh's "Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," and Donne's "The Bait." Assign a theme, impromptu or out of class: Choose *one* aspect in which the poems are similar and *one* in which they are different; compare and contrast the similarities and differences with respect to these aspects only; where applicable, use examples from your own experience.

Development by analogy poses real problems, but it is a skill which

the student needs to learn. Possibly non-literary materials are better for the purpose. Your students have read Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Assign an out-of-class theme: How can this book be equated by analogy to the Book of Genesis? Or they have read Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." Equate it by analogy to a theorem in geometry. A little ingenuity here will yield good results. After some practice, the students will be able to find their own analogues.

Development by induction offers an unlimited range of assignments. Students have read rather widely in a single author or a school of authors. Make the assignment specific: On the basis of your reading, develop inductively—by specific citation of examples—a major theme which underlies many, if not most, of the novels (short stories, poems, plays).

Development by deduction is, on the surface, a bit more difficult, but it can be set up. Give the students a major theme and make the assignment as follows: This theme appears in many of the works of_____. Analyze this work and show the extent to which it embodies this theme. Whitman's "transcendental leap" of death, Wordsworth's "natural morality," or Dreiser's determinism are good possibilities.

In addition, of course, themes may be assigned on any aspects of literary analysis, exegesis, or criticism; but my own feeling is that the most fruitful assignments, both for the development of skills in composition and in the understanding of literature, will relate the students' own experience to what they have read. Admittedly, there must occasionally be a purely dull and utilitarian assignment like this: Analyze the metrical structure of Frost's "Fire and Ice"; note all the variations from the pattern and give reasons, if possible. Then paraphrase the meaning of the poem.

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